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THE WEBB HOUSE

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HISTORY OF THE
WEBB HOUSE

HISTORY OF THE WEBB HOUSE

BY
MRS. WILLIAM H. H. SMITH

READ AT THE WEBB HOUSE BEFORE THE
SOCIETY OF COLONIAL DAMES
OCTOBER 28TH, 1919

A Boston writer says,
“When we consider the momentous
results of the Yorktown campaign
planned in the Council Room of the
Webb House by men of highest
station in the State, the Army and
Navy, it may be claimed that this
is the most historic house in New
England”

THIS HOUSE IS NOW OWNED BY THE
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GIFT
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WEBB HOUSE

TO give adequately the history of the Webb House or any other New England mansion of an early time it would be necessary to go over the entire history of England, political and religious, or at least that of the four Georges. But I refrain — and begin only with the first settler of that name, Richard Webb, who came from County Dorset in 1620 (this seems very early but is the date I found), first to Cambridge, then to Boston 1632; went with the great Hooker migration to Hartford; there recorded on the Grand Jury in 1643, then to Stratford, Norwalk, and finally to Stamford. He left one of the three largest estates in his town (Stamford) and was followed by a line of Josephs, eldest sons. One of these born in 1700, married, in 1728, Sarah Blatchley and for second wife Elizabeth Starr; was First Lieutenant in the Revolutionary War though seventy-five years old.

His son Joseph, born 1729, married 1748, Mehitable Nott of Wethersfield. He is the Joseph Webb who, in 1752, built this house, having been married four years. He and Mehitable lived here until he died in 1761, a period of only about nine years. He bought the property

of Samuel Wolcott who owned large tracts of land hereabouts. The Silas Deane house next door was also on land bought of the Wolcotts.

With the promptness with which such matters were then adjusted, his relict Mehitable married, in 1763, the Hon. Silas Deane, and they lived at the Goodrich house, second house south of Webb house, while building the handsome house next door. Mr. Deane was a self-made man and a climber who climbed so successfully, that he, to some degree, dominated the councils in Washington, where he was a prominent member in Congress. Mrs. Deane's first husband, Joseph Webb, died when he was only thirty-four so she was still young and thought it best to keep these two elegant mansions in the family. Mehitable at her second marriage gave this house to her son Joseph Webb, born 1749. In 1774 he married Abigail Chester, a member of the wealthy and influential family descended from Leonard Chester, Armiger, whose tabletomb in Wethersfield graveyard is dated 1648, second oldest in the State.

Now, let us place these four young people in these two hospitable homes. They were elegant entertainers. There were Mr. and Mrs. Deane next door, and her son Joseph aged twenty-five, and Abigail aged nineteen, doing the honors here. It is probable that on Washington's first visit in Wethersfield he stayed at Mrs. Deane's, as a letter from Mr. Deane to his wife Madam Mehitable, mentions that General Washington with his staff and suite may visit there on the way to Boston, and enjoins her to prepare to entertain

them properly, lodging as many as possible at her house, and others at taverns, a rather large order, as Washington travelled in state with staff, suite and servants.

Wethersfield was then a rich and handsome town. In driving down Main or Broad Street we notice many fine mansions of the period and we know of others burned or demolished, built about that time. Some indigenous trees, here and there forest trees, were of good size, but most of the planting was new. With the exception of the growth of trees the appearance of the street was much the same then, as now, and the town was considered a winning rival to Hartford.

The Great River was a fountain of wealth to all settlers near its banks; fish were salted and packed away; furs bought from the Indians for almost nothing were exported for many of the elegancies of life in return, and lumber and minerals also; and game was plentiful. This house, with its lofty gambrel roof, its many rooms with high ceilings, its substantial frame and the beautiful interior finish and handsome stairway, was perhaps the best of several similar houses of this period. The Belden, Lockwood, Lockwood-Belden, Marsh, Latimer, Crane, Griswold, and Newson, houses adorned the wide avenue, while the new church edifice was the pride of the town, the lines of the spire springing from the ground and not from the roof, according to Sir Christopher Wren's plan. Good taste in architecture, without and within, characterized this period.

Much cheap sarcasm has been expended on the "Washington houses," the many places where

the great Washington stayed on his journeys up and down. I want to meet that point now. Before the Revolution he was an army officer under the Crown. The tendency in promotions and precedence was to favor English officers above American. Washington would not submit to this and went to Boston to settle this question with the presiding general there, claiming for Americans equality in birth, breeding, ability as officers, and the right to equal standing. With his force and concise common sense, he gained the point for himself and his brother soldiers.

When the break with England came, although he did all in his power to avert the rupture, yet he met the case with amazing courage and promptness. He was the leader of a desperate cause, he needed the assistance of every family in America, and he sought it, stopping in their homes and striving to meet and interest young men of every station. When he went to Boston to take command of the American Army, "the embattled farmers," he was already well known as an officer. He gladly accepted invitations all along the route, going and returning. This handsome, richly dressed young general, of dignified, majestic mein and courtly manner, was invited and welcomed at many houses on the way. Receptions were given by the leading families; he danced the minuet with the young ladies; conversed with men of all stations; presented the cause of the Colonies and won the enthusiastic following that he must have. So when some one says, with skeptical wit, that he would like to see

an old house where Washington did *not* stop, one might say there *were* some such belonging to Tories, or indifferent patriots, or those too mean to entertain.

I like to picture early Wethersfield at such times, the streets gay with dashing young aides riding hither and yon with invitations or messages to men of importance, well knowing that Priscilla was peeping from behind the blinds; dignitaries from Hartford, Windsor and towns below, coming in coaches, or more likely on horseback, to pay their respects to the young general, and to consider with him the momentous situation.

Entering Hospitality Hall, we find young Abigail Webb, mistress of the mansion, receiving in the North Parlor, sometimes discreetly sifting her guests a little, sending some of the less important to the punch or toddy bowl in the keeping-room, and conveying men of influence and sagacity to converse with the great man and his suite holding his court in the Council Room, not yet having that name. Later on, I fancy they would all mingle sociably and no one would neglect the punch bowl or the "four kinds of cake," the least number that would be handed about.

I love their youth, Washington himself only forty-three, their splendid vitality, their ardent courage, their fire and fortitude. This was Young America! Young Wethersfield, Young Aristocracy with its motto, "Noblesse Oblige."

Here Washington gathered about him young men from all families, Goodrich, Robbins, Griswold, Coleman, Saltonstall, Welles, Belden,

Kellogg, and so on, and all the ardent youth of the town became his followers through Trenton and Valley Forge.

At night when all had left and the General sat talking it over with the Webbs, sipping their last toddy together, and after they had escorted him to his north front chamber, placing wax candles in silver candlestocks there, and the great man stood by the window and through the young trees and over the lilac bushes, looked across to the new meeting house with graceful spire silvered by the moon, what were his thoughts then? Where the splendid optimism with which he had talked downstairs!

However that was, the next morning found the cheerful guest striding over to the new church to climb the steeple. From that height he looked across the beautiful River to the wooded hills beyond, and even his own Virginia could not offer a lovelier view. I think in his mind he may have repeated Connecticut's motto, "Qui transtulit sustinet," and have taken new courage.

Samuel Blatchley Webb, a younger brother of Joseph, was on Washington's staff, having entered service at the outbreak of war under Capt. John Chester — Webb then a handsome, splendid officer of twenty-two was said to have influenced Washington to make this rendezvous at the house of his brother Joseph.

Then followed years of war until the Continentals felt that a decisive move must be made or drag on indefinitely. So now we come to the Council of May, 1781. General Washington had arranged that Count de Rochambeau, Admiral

of the French fleet, then at anchor near Saybrook, Count de Barras, the Chevalier de Chastellux, all attended by their suites, General Knox, General Duportail, Governor Trumbull, Colonel Wadsworth, were to meet him at Joseph Webb's house, at Wethersfield.

Again my fancy peoples these rooms with gay uniforms, stiff brocades, powdered hair, shoe-buckles and knee-buckles of brilliants, a high comb or brooch here and there, set with small diamonds, that company of dazzling youth, brave with high purpose. Here again Dame Abigail and Madam Mehitable came to the front as ladies of the mansion. The Frenchmen and their aides were entertained at these three houses; again Washington had his north front chamber here; again the ladies did the honors, assisted by the young ladies of the neighborhood.

A mile toward Hartford, Colonel Solomon Welles had built a large, handsome house for his large and handsome family, twelve in number, mostly grown up. Seven were girls. He was a stern man and would not allow his girls to marry. Suitors were discouraged, though their brother Roger had been in Yale College and must have had friends who would like to visit him and the sisters seven, Eunice, Sarah, Hannah, Penelope, Prudence and young Mehitable and Mary. Roger had been in service since Washington's early visits here, going from college into the army, and his sisters were among those who assisted at the Deane and Webb houses during these important events.

Obviously General Washington would incline

to the formal ritual of the Church of England and was a member of the American echo of that Church. But with his broad views he would be edified by any sincere form of worship, and wherever he was, he attended the Sabbath services. Here at the Webb House, a committee waited upon him to ask at what hour his Excellency would wish to attend Divine Service. He replied "At the usual hour, gentlemen. The time of public worship is not to be altered on my account," — which shows the respect paid to his plans and opinions, and the modesty with which he accepted it.

What a flutter of ribbons and furbelows in the "singers' seats" and also in the "high seats" as the great General and his brilliant aides and staff marched with clanking swords up the center aisle to the many seats reserved for them! It is recorded that the General paid close attention to every word of anthem, hymn and sermon. The Welleses were always singers. It is probable that some of the daughters of Solomon were in the singers' seats, as well as their brothers, while Colonel Solomon marched with the officers.

While the foreign admiral and generals met in this momentous Council with the Governor of the State and our Commander-in-Chief, Abigail somewhat anxious and sobered from stress of war, but still fresh and young, rallied her girl friends about her to serve the punch bowl and the stirrup-cup. Times were again gay in the streets and in Hospitality Hall during the five days of this Council, where was matured that plan which has been called by an English writer "an episode

never surpassed by daring on one side and surprise on the other, in the history of all time."

How did they dare to do it? The plan, as we know, was completely carried out. The few troops rode or tramped through marsh and forest down to Virginia; the ships tacked and zigzagged against the wind along down the coast. Army and navy met before Yorktown and laid siege for six weeks and the formal surrender took place. Young Roger Welles was Captain under the Marquise de LaFayette, one of 100 picked men, all over six feet tall, who formed his particular command. During the siege Roger led an attack on a redoubt and carried it, driving the guard farther in toward the fort. In his letters home, young Capt. Welles writes most enthusiastically that "the Marquis conducted himself like a Fabious and not like 'the ambitious boy' that Lord Cornwallis was pleased to call him." Also he wrote of the capitulation: "The most pleasing sight I ever beheld was to see those haughty fellows march out of their strong entrenchments and ground their arms." Alexander Hamilton was the first man to enter the Fort at Yorktown after the evacuation, closely followed by Roger Welles, the second man inside those walls after British officers and Hessian troops had been ordered out.

In those days the men of the Welles family had directed their affections wisely, selecting their wives from families of wealth and distinction — Goodrich, Pitkin, Chester, Talcott. Colonel Solomon married his second cousin Sarah Welles, like himself fifth generation in descent from

Governor Thomas Welles. Their fine, new house stands on the home-lot of Governor Thomas. Many of us are descended from Governor Thomas but perhaps all do not know that the Warden's house next to the prison — the Solomon Welles house — stands on the Thomas Welles home-lot, where Governor Thomas once lived in a former house. Solomon's son, Capt. Roger, who now comes home laden with honors, was afterwards made a Brigadier General. It was *his* eldest son, Martin Welles, a young lawyer of Hartford, who in 1821 bought this Webb house, which, had meanwhile had two owners since the Webbs,— James Fortune and James Belden. The Webbs owned it less than sixty years, Martin Welles and sons and grandsons, nearly a century. Always within my memory it was called the Judge Welles house.

My mother was named Frances Norton Welles after the wife of her uncle, this Judge Martin Welles. So this great aunt of mine used to invite me occasionally from my age of eight or ten to sixteen years old, to stay here a fortnight at a time. I was always allowed to sleep in the Washington room, and it was with a fearful pride and joy that I buried my head in the billowy feathers, for fear that I might see his majestic wraith on the slanting moonbeam.

Judge Welles had a stern and rather forbidding manner like his grandfather Solomon. Aunt Welles was as dainty and exquisite as a Dresden shepherdess, very small of stature but with a queenly dignity and elegance, a true lady of the old school. Her housekeeping was generous and

hospitable, her table was handsomely served. Every afternoon she dressed in silvery silk and real lace, seldom in black, with pretty cameo or Florentine mosaic pin, objects of my admiration, especially the Florentine flowers and doves. She wore a turban of fresh snow-white tulle perfectly arranged. My youthful memories of this house and its cheerful tone make me still love it, with all its changes.

Is it a *dead* past? To me it is alive with the best spirit of Americanism, and of Washington as its prophet.

One may say, In these stirring times, is there nothing better to do than to dig into old houses?

The architecture tells of itself much of the history and manners of the time, the tough sincerity of foundations and chimneys, the many great ovens, seven in the fine Churchill house in Newington, one in the cellar capable of roasting a whole ox and it was done at several times, and the other arrangements for entertainment. Several mansions, besides taverns, had ball-rooms. They even had balls at the ordination of a minister. We have record of them at East Windsor, Guilford and at Newington by tradition. One of the young ladies of the Churchill family that I have referred to, said, that she danced in one night through two pairs of white satin slippers at one ordination ball. The burden of their Calvinism must have sat lightly upon them at times! Do you suppose that young Abigail Webb used that big garret upstairs simply as a store room for old chests and dried peppers and onions? With all these young men and officers and girls

about her? Don't you fancy that the village fiddler was sent for and placed in the gallery up there, that the Sir Roger de Coverly and the stately Minuet were often danced there as well as in these rooms perhaps?

Then, for comfort: the big fireplaces, the toddy closets, the cool cellars for vegetables and fruits stored in plenty for a year, the cool cupboards for mince pies and election cake, always ready for company, the saddle-room and the sparkin' bench, all these are in the building of the house, when the house was the home, and tell their own "sermons in stone." Their lesson to us is the homemaking, the hospitable home, which we have nearly lost.

As for the Webbs and the Welleses of that time, they died, and slept with their fathers. And the rest of their acts, and all that they did; how they warred and triumphed, how they prevailed with the sword, and overcame their enemies, are they not written in the books of the Chronicles of that time?

JULIA WELLES GRISWOLD SMITH.



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